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Mackie, Alan

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Relocating place in the life of neo-liberal youth

Alan Mackie, Teaching Fellow, Learning in Communities, University of Edinburgh

It has been heartening of late to note a growing focus on the importance of 'place' in the sociological literature in relation to the lives of young people. For any youth work practitioner its importance is not lost, but it has often been overlooked in academic writing as scholars (quite rightly) sought to unpick mechanisms of discrimination and inequality related to factors of class, gender, race and disability amongst others. Recently, however, many authors have noted that alongside these more traditional 'axes,' place should be incorporated into (not alongside - an important distinction) the dynamic, such is its influence.

In an excellent paper reviewing 'space' in sociological literature, Thomas F. Gieryn (2000) suggests that academics regularly give the impression that they aren't interested in conceptualising the role of place and space. For those interested in youth, this is of critical importance when we begin to unpack the role of locality in shaping identity, life-chances, opportunities to socialise, play and develop. It is an interesting exercise to just pause and think back to your own childhood and youth and consider the areas that you yourself frequented, with adults and when with friends. How do you think these shaped your youth? Are these memories happy? How much freedom did you have? Were these places comfortable, could you relax? How do you think these shaped your identity growing up? Did you have opportunities to play, socialise and develop? Doubtless there are a whole host of questions one could ask at this point.

Gieryn differentiates between space and place. Space, he argues, is when place has all the meaning and value sucked out of it. Place, he suggests, is 'space filled up by people, practices, objects, and representations...place is not merely a setting or backdrop, but an agentic player in the game - a force with detectable and independent effects on social life' (p466). He makes the important point that place is relational – that is, it is the buildings, roads, streets, parks and geographic locations where we live and operate, but

it is also about the meanings, interpretations and identifications we have with those places. We act upon our place – but it acts back on us. The meanings that we (as individuals and groups) attach and ascribe to places are rooted in culture, history and identity. They (can) create a sense of belonging which is important to identity formation (May, 2017). But for young people growing up, particularly in urban areas I would suggest, these factors are hugely important in limiting (or not) the experiences and opportunities available to them as they grow up. It is also important to note that what some think of ‘deprived neighbourhoods’ can often be seen as places of safety for young people growing up there. This is where the relational aspect of place comes to the forefront – family and social networks which offer security, friendship, love, respect and a sense of belonging. In short, the ties that we all cherish.

As numerous scholars have argued, for young working-class people attachment to place can play an important part in their sense of self and their sense of belonging (Reay and Lucey, 2000; Skeggs, 2004; MacDonald et al, 2005; Stahl and Baars, 2016). As Cuervo and Wyn (2014) write,

It is about the social relationships that provide a life anchor, a sense of personal physical and symbolic location...young people’s relationships to people and places are a source of well-being and security, particularly in times of uncertainty (p907-13)

Such connections are critical to young people, yet the importance of place is often lost in policy which can exhort young people today to be ‘mobile’ and to look outside their immediate locale in order to seek employment and opportunity (Fejes, 2010; Corbett and Forsey, 2017; France and Roberts, 2017). Here we can witness an inherent tension – on the one hand, neoliberalism exhorts young people to be flexible and mobile; on the other hand, young people can seek the security and familiarity of their home as an anchor in a sea of uncertainty. Policy discourses appeal to a certain subjectivity in young people; neoliberal, individualised and highly flexible (Allen and Hollingworth, 2013; Stahl and Habib, 2017). However, such subjectivities are highly classed and for young working-class people, their attachment to place is potentially bound up in their marginalisation. When the policy discourse prioritises flexibility and mobility, young

working-class people's attachment to their neighbourhoods can potentially contribute to their misrecognition. As Stahl and Habib (2017) note, 'within a neoliberal conception which privileges a trajectory of upward mobility...working-class attachment to place often connotes stagnation, ambivalence, defeat and failure' (p2).

Webster (2009) states, 'working-class young people's marginalised transitions to adulthood often take place in inner city neighbourhoods and peripheral estates characterised by de-industrialisation, destabilisation, deprivation' (p70). Young people growing up in poorer areas have a tendency to remain rooted within their neighbourhoods and communities (McDowell, 2002; MacDonald et al, 2005; Farrugia, 2014). In my own study a regular feature of the young people's narratives concerned the options available to them. As Roberts (2012) so presciently notes, structural influences such as place circumvent the horizon of young people's opportunity. In the locality under scrutiny, the young women in my study were pursuing jobs and/or training in social care or hair and beauty whereas the young men were being guided towards training in trade professions. The volume of hair and beauty salons in the locality appears to be influencing the post-school choice of many of the participants, as does the availability of gendered courses at the local college (which do not require high level qualifications to access). Kintrea et al (2015) ask the very pertinent question:

...whether, and if so how, living in a particular place (as distinct from coming from a particular socioeconomic, class or ethnic background) influences people's life chances? The key question is whether such neighbourhoods merely reflect poverty or if they also serve to maintain and extend it by embedding their residents in a context that activates further disadvantage. (p669)

To stress, there is nothing inherently wrong with young people following career paths in hair and beauty, or in construction or other manual industries. But what is questionable is that occupational aspirations continue to be formed by discourses that appeal to traditional gender roles concerning masculinity and femininity (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Although young people can display remarkable agency, it is often shaped by class backgrounds and the local availability of opportunities that follow

traditional gendered roles. The question is are these opportunities led by the young people or are the young people being led towards these particular careers by the availability of these courses? The point in terms of social justice is that ‘choice’ does not exist in a socio-cultural (or economic) vacuum. Young people’s future paths are heavily circumscribed by what is available to them in their immediate locale, their treatment by the agencies they engage with and their ability to seize on opportunities that come their way. It is pure fantasy to suggest that all young people currently have equal opportunity to pursue a path to a successful and stable career of their choice. Or that ‘choice’ is made in a purely rational, socio-historic vacuum.

Further, when policy discourse foregrounds the importance of young people’s individual choice within education and labour markets, the importance of their attachment to place shifts the inequality of local opportunity structures to the foreground. This is critical in terms of misrecognition, certainly here in Scotland as the Scottish Government (2014) prioritises career services and guidance as a means of enabling young people to seize control of their future:

By offering young people - from as early as during their primary/nursery school education - a clear picture of all the career choices available to them, we will equip them with the skills and knowledge to make more informed choices throughout their school studies and beyond. (p29)

But this may be in vain for young people who are unable to access the stepping stones that can act as a ‘launch pad’ in the here-and-now. Much research highlights that young people growing up in poorer areas are being lost in the ‘social limbo’ of ‘the secondary labour market’ characterised by the poorest working conditions, pervasive un- and underemployment and the most precarious working conditions (Shildrick et al, 2012; Pascual and Martin, 2017). The more pernicious aspect of this precarity is that this instability breeds ontological insecurity, creating ‘a structure of affect which represents a heightened sense of expendability or disposability that is differentially distributed throughout society’ (Butler, 2011: 13). For these young people, a lack of finance and experience of hardship in the immediacy can result in them being unwilling to look too far into the future, beholden as they are to dealing with issues in the present. Such a

situation exacerbates already existing (redistributive) inequalities, allowing young people with more capital to work with greater clarity towards a stable and more secure future (Foster and Spencer, 2011; Bryant and Ellard, 2015). There is a danger that young people growing up in poorer areas may be blamed for seemingly ‘drifting’ in the labour market. The government, for example, can argue that young people have been equipped with the necessary guidance to work towards a stable and secure career. However, these young people are unable to imagine or begin to work towards a ‘career’ due to structural impediments in their immediacy. The paradox is that as we have seen the growth of individualisation and the associated pressures of the ‘choice biography’, the key social institutions of school, work, community and the family are no longer acting as guarantors of successful youth to adult transitions in the way they once did (Leccardi, 2014). Wyn and Woodman (2006) make the important point that when the onus of ‘choice’ is placed upon the shoulders of young people and they are forced to draw on their own and their family’s resources to achieve their goals then the result is, inevitably, one of inequality.

It is important to highlight, however, that the marginalisation of young people is not impacting on their future aspirations. A common charge in more recent times in terms of social policy is that young people struggling in the labour market are lacking in aspiration (Clair et al., 2013; Baker et al., 2014; Berrington et al, 2016). However, evidence consistently highlights that young people desire a stable job from which they can anchor and build themselves a career – and for most, hopes include a car, a home and perhaps a family in the future (Finlay et al, 2010; Archer et al, 2014; Hartas, 2016). However, the ability to cogently connect the present to the future is becoming (or has become?) far more challenging for young people – particularly marginalised young people. Devadason (2008) notes it is one thing to have hopes and dreams, no matter how conventional these may be, it is quite another to be able to connect the immediate to those hopes in a coherent and structured way; ‘a lack of progress in their employment and insecurity feed into their reluctance to plan. For those young adults present uncertainty seems to promote vagueness’ (p1136). Bryant and Ellard (2015) found in their study:

For our participants a ‘normal’ future meant prioritising paid employment in the sequencing of their futures. Most participants were only minimally concerned with the type of work they wanted. Although some held clear ambitions, most expressed the view that employment was fundamental to achieving a secure future. (p490)

Instead, perhaps a more accurate way to locate marginalised young people’s future hopes is to think of their aspiration as ‘bounded’ (Evans, 2002). As other studies have found, rather than having low aspirations, young people may in fact have low expectations - certainly in the immediate future - due to their lack of qualifications and a growing sense of disenchantment given their struggles to gain a stable foothold in a hostile labour market. Much like other research has found, the ability of young people to develop a ‘choice biography’ is severely limited given the lack of options available to them to secure stable employment. As Hoskins and Barker (2017) note, ‘the issue facing many disadvantaged young people is the process of translating their high aspirations for the future into a lived reality’ (p48).

As other research has found, the important point is that opportunity structures, and the extent to which young people feel their options are open or constrained, are largely dictated by the structural conditions around them. Hardgrove et al (2015) noted that for the young people in their study:

...they bounced from one job to another without any sign of advancement or continuity in employment. There were no predictable pathways that led to desirable outcomes. We argue that such a predicament diminishes ability to imagine specific possible selves toward which to navigate. (p168)

Finlay et al (2010) make the point that the discourse of ‘more choices, more chances’ was a welcome addition to the Scottish policy discourse. However, there is less focus given to the structural impediments that can inhibit young people’s ability to develop and realise long-term objectives and ambitions (Mackie and Tett, 2013). What is perhaps needed is a move away from discussion on aspirations and choice towards an

emphasis on ensuring young people can find routes towards interesting, fulfilling and decently paid employment (Archer et al, 2014). With widening inequality and cuts to public resources to support young people in the transition from school-to-work, a focus on aspirations alone is doomed to failure on current evidence.

Offering intensive career guidance without addressing the cause of young people's initial marginalisation will do little to alter the issues which led to their marginalisation in the first place. Government policy that emphasises that young people need to take responsibility for their own career choices severely risks constructing an agentic and individualised view of young people's ability to construct a coherent career path by airbrushing out of the picture the innumerable impediments disadvantaged young people must overcome to fulfil their potential. Young people are desperate to find work and display remarkable agency in searching for employment, but it is a situated agency, and this informs the types of opportunities that they feel able and willing to take up. As such, it is important to add 'place' to the 'choice dynamic' in order to understand the impact of poverty and inequality on young people growing up in marginalised neighbourhoods. Particularly when it is contrasted with young people growing up in areas with more resources (economic as well as social and cultural) and more opportunities. The result is often the demonization of young people growing up in poorer communities, as lazy, ignorant calls for them to 'get on the bike/bus' fail to understand the complex reasons behind their reluctance to be 'footloose, entrepreneurs of the self'. The sense of security they derive from their locality is in sharp contrast to the precarity that punctuates other areas of their lives – the poverty, the stigmatisation, the lack of opportunity and the feeling that they have been forgotten by those in power.

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